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LITTLE KNOWN STORY OF A GROUND BRFEAKING WOMAN HELEN CLARKE

Maybe if she had been all Caucasian or all Native American, Helen Clarke would be a familiar name in Helena and all of Montana. It deserves to be.

She was born in 1846 at the mouth of the Judith River to a fur trader father and a Piegan mother, became an actor in New York, was the one of the first two women elected to public office in Montana, and later played a part in national Native American policy.

Clarke's life is the stuff from which legends are made, yet her name and her accomplishments have never received the acclaim they deserve.

In March during Women's History Month, the Montana Historical Society fields many requests from media and others for information on Montana's groundbreaking women like Jeannette Rankin, who was the first woman elected to Congress.

While doing some research on women in history, an article on Clarke in MHS's "Montana The Magazine of Western History" reminded us of the truly ground-breaking role she played in state history.

Her father Malcolm Clarke and mother Coth-co-co-na sent Helen east where she received a classical education at a convent school in Cincinnati. She returned to Montana in the mid-1860s and joined her family, which had settled on a ranch north of Helena.

After her father was killed in an apparent family dispute with a relative of his wife-- and the subsequent and tragic racially tinged events that followed -- Helen moved to Minneapolis to live with

Malcolm's financially well-off sister Charlotte. Later she moved to New York where she enjoyed a brief but successful career as an actress.

In 1875 she returned to Montana, and was welcomed back in Helena by her father's old friend Wilbur Fisk Sanders, who was one of the founders of the Montana Historical Society.

She used her classical education to become a teacher in Helena. She endured whispered prejudice because of her Piegan heritage, but Sanders remained a constant and protective friend.

In 1882 Helen ran for Lewis and Clark County Superintendent of Schools. She ran as a Republican, and it was reported that local Democrats were so impressed with her qualifications that they withdrew their candidate. Helen and Alice Nichols of Meagher County, who also was elected superintendent of schools that year, became the first women elected to public office in Montana.

Despite her success, ugly stories about her "mixed blood" continued and in 1889 Helen again left Montana.

In 1890 President Benjamin Harrison signed her commission to the U.S. Indian Service as an allotment agent for Native American lands. She was the second woman appointed as an allotment agent – and apparently the first and only person so named who was of Native American ancestry.

Throughout her life mixed ancestry dogged her footsteps, and her time in the Indian Service was no exception. Allotting tribal land to individual tribal members was seen by many Native Americans as an attempt to cut them off from their heritage, and many resented her involvement.

But in 1903 Helen led a successful campaign back in Montana to remove an Indian agent at the Blackfeet Reservation from office for his mistreatment of Native Americans including encouraging the proliferation of alcohol on tribal lands. The Blackfeet appreciated her involvement.

She also was fighting against prejudice against women in the job market. In an unsuccessful letter arguing against efforts to fire her from the Indian Service, Helen also noted: "There is prejudice always at a woman holding any sort of position that pays."

Returning to Montana after losing her federal job, Helen had a home near what is now East Glacier, where she had guests such as Mrs. Issac Guggenheim, Mrs. George Vanderbilt, photographer Walter McClintock and painters Julius Seyler and Joseph Henry Sharp.

In 1923 Father Halligan was summoned to Helen's home, where she lay dying of pneumonia at age 76. The priest said among her final words were, "Children should have nothing but the greatest admiration and the greatest respect, the greatest love and reverence for their teachers."

Even in death, Helen still suffered the whispered words of racism. Some said her dying words reflected her love of education, and others a warning that Native Americans should submit to the White Man's way of life.

If you want to learn more about Helen, contact the MHS Research Center or contact and Tammy Ryan at 406-444-4708 to order a copy of the magazine with the complete article.